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## Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays May 17, 2005

Standing in a school courtyard in Irbil, Iraq last January, some of us were fortunate to be able to witness that nation's first, heroic steps toward democracy in more than half a century. The election was a decisive moment for the people of Iraq, and its reverberations are still being felt throughout the Middle East. In Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, people saw the Iraqis assert their inalienable right to a freer, more secure future and asked, "Why not here?"

The question challenges us. What does prevent the development of democratic institutions and free economies in the region? Reasons often cited to explain political and economic stagnation in the Middle East include the corrupting dominance of oil wealth, the distorting legacy of Western colonialism, the military exigencies of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the alleged inherent incompatibility between Islam and democracy.

But the rise of Islamist terrorism as a global strategic threat, brought to our shores with galvanizing horror on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, buried those excuses and breathed new life into the call for democratic reforms in the Arab and Muslim world. The September 2002 National Security Strategy made the promotion of democracy a primary tool in the war against terrorism. In his Second Inaugural Address, the President succinctly set out this element of what is called "The Bush Doctrine," when he declared, "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

It was not always so. For many, we come late to the dialogue advocating democracy in the Middle East. Having long subrogated overt support for reformers to our Faustian Cold War bargains with repressive, oil-rich regimes, ours is not always a trusted voice in the discussion. Others discount our good intentions in the mistaken belief support for Israel and support for Palestinian rights and aspirations are incompatible.

So we meet this morning to examine the scope and impact of U.S. efforts to foster the rule of law, self-government, civil society and market economies in a part of the world thought by some to be geographically or culturally immune to modern forces. In advocating the universal values of human dignity, political self-determination and economic opportunity, we advance our national interest in helping those who would drain the repressive swamps where terrorism breeds.

It is not easy work. Exercise of the misnamed "soft power" of ideas requires subtlety, humility and perseverance, traits not always synonymous with U.S. security policy. As the birth of our own democracy proved, emerging from oppression to self-sufficiency is the work of decades, not days. But liberty must be pursued with a determination and vision that allows indigenous movements to grow naturally and enthusiastically, at a pace of their choosing. The oppressor will always caution patience. Endless patience. We can no longer succumb to the despot's alluring promise of near-term stability purchased at the expense of attempting to delay the inevitable explosion of human freedom.

Nor can we indulge hubris. As then Governor George W. Bush said in 1999, "America cherishes ... freedom, but we do not own it. We value the elegant structures of our own democracy, but realize that, in other societies, the architecture will vary. We propose our principles; we must not impose our culture. Yet the basic principles of human freedom and dignity are universal. People should be able to say what they think. Elect those who govern them. These ideals have proven their power on every continent...."

The witnesses on our first panel today understand the power, and the costs, of the pursuit of liberty. Natan Sharansky is a leading voice for democracy as a force for change in the Middle East. A former Israeli government minister and influential author, he offers the world a sobering look at the choice between free societies and what he calls "fear societies." Mithal al-Alusi is an Iraqi patriot whose dedication and personal sacrifice to the cause of democracy give his views a unique moral authority.

All our witnesses bring invaluable experience and unquestioned expertise to this important discussion and we welcome their testimony.